The aim of Responsible Electoral Product (REP) Certification is to increase the quantity and quality of content people are exposed to about candidates seeking to represent them in the United States. The concept has been developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders across the partisan spectrum over the last year with funding support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Charles Koch Foundation. The strategy is by no means a comprehensive solution to the challenges of content moderation, but:

- the limited focus makes implementation at the scale large intermediaries operate feasible;
- the strategy enjoys rare cross-partisan support;
- it could considerably improve the “signal to noise” ratio in elections, one of the most critical and challenging arenas to address; and
- it can be tested and developed in the near-term helping cultivate trust amongst the key stakeholders necessary for more ambitious collaborative efforts down the road.

REP certification would only be applicable to what we refer to as candidate engagement content – debates, townhalls, forums, interactive voter guides or other formats hosted by a third party in which all viable candidates can participate. As illustrated to the right, interested publishers would apply to a national REP Council – an independent multi-stakeholder organization – for certification confirming that their model for candidate engagement complies with REP standards. REP-certified content would in turn be amplified on participating intermediaries thereby:

- incentivizing publishers to produce REP-compliant content because the distribution and corresponding monetization opportunities would be significantly greater;
- increasing the signal-to-noise ratio of electoral content on participating intermediaries so potential voters have high-quality content critical to the democratic process; and
- establishing a more level playing field for candidates to genuinely earn the reach they need to compete without relying exclusively on buying ads or riling up partisan passions.

Many of the other strategies being discussed involve legislation that limit certain types of content. These approaches are particularly challenging in the US due to the current political gridlock and strong First Amendment tradition. REP Certification is different in that it would rely on a non-governmental standards council without requiring government regulation and leverage market incentives to encourage and amplify quality speech as opposed to limiting what can be said.

Thought leaders across the partisan spectrum agree that debates, townhalls and other types of candidate engagement content are particularly valuable to voters. At the same time, there is also a growing chorus ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) arguing that we should reimagine our formats for candidate engagement since the current versions are outdated and not adequately helping voters make informed choices. We agree and contend that standards-based increases in amplification and monetization opportunities would provide precisely the kind of market incentives necessary to stimulate that innovation.
What would be the criteria for REP certification?

The devil is in the details both in terms of the specific language and how these high-level principles would be operationalized. The following draft criteria were developed in consultation with a cross-partisan network of relevant stakeholders and will continue to evolve and be refined over time.

1. **Candidates participate and speak for themselves.**
   - *Rationale:* Candidates are the ones who would ultimately be accountable to the people.

2. **All viable candidates are given reasonable opportunity to participate.**
   - *Rationale:* It must be a level playing field.

3. **There is a mechanism for contesting factual assertions.**
   - *Rationale:* Fact-checking has become a partisan issue, but there is broad agreement that other candidates and/or journalists should have the opportunity to publicly challenge the accuracy of candidate statements so individuals can assess their veracity.

4. **The majority of the questions asked are reflective of the electorate's priorities.**
   - *Rationale:* This is to guard against an interest group shaping the agenda to advance its aims and to ensure issues the public wants addressed are discussed.

5. **Citizen participants and/or audience members should be broadly representative of the electorate.**
   - *Rationale:* If there is a studio audience or discussion with potential voters, it is important that the group is not stacked with supporters of one candidate.

Who would do the certifying and how would it be done?

Certification would be conducted by a new non-governmental organization – the **REP Council** – that has specialized operational capacity and is overseen by leaders from civil society, academia and industry across the partisan spectrum. To secure certification, interested publishers would apply to the REP Council for certification of a particular content format, not for every piece of content. For example, the Texas Tribune might apply for certification of its **Split Decision** series and indicate how that series would comply with the criteria. Assuming the design of the format meets the criteria, the format would be granted **provisional certification** along with requirements for **verification data** to be provided for each production of that format. So if Texas Tribune produced an episode of **Split Decision** in 15 Congressional districts, it would need to provide verification data for each episode, but only go through the formal certification process once, significantly limiting the resource requirements for both the publisher and certifier. The specific operational methods for how compliance is assessed and verified would ideally be developed based on the “simulated certification” process described below.

How would REP-certified content be amplified?

Amplification would inevitably take different forms on different intermediaries, but there are numerous existing products or features that present either immediate opportunities for these purposes or analogues that could be emulated. The Meet the Candidates feature pictured to the right was pushed out at the top of all American Facebook users’ News Feed in advance of the 2018 US mid-term elections. Users who clicked through were presented with basic information about who was seeking to represent them for every federal and state election. Prominent inclusion in that feature is one obvious example of how REP-certified content could be amplified. We do not have engagement data on that feature but that alone would presumably increase reach for content enormously given the prioritized positioning. And there are numerous other natural opportunities: inclusion in knowledge panels on searches, prioritization in auto-play on relevant videos, dedicated spaces on news aggregators or even streaming services seeking to provide users with high-quality and relevant public interest programming. Amplification would also provide intermediaries with the opportunity to leverage their targeting capacities (at least geographically) for civic benefit. Moreover, by amplifying all REP-certified content pertaining to users (regardless of their political leanings) participating intermediaries...
could demonstrate a pro-active effort to be a “forum for a true diversity of political discourse” as referenced in Section 230.

**Which races would REP Certification apply to?**

Ultimately, it is our hope that REP Certification could be implemented in all but the smallest of elections. At first, we propose focusing on what we are calling “mid-ballot races” that:

- are not garnering substantial national media coverage (which basically means every race except the presidential, a few high-profile senate or governor races, and the occasional special election) and
- have a large enough electorate – or "market" from the publisher's perspective – to justify the investment of sufficient production resources.

To pierce through the vast amount of content about the presidential election in a way that is meaningful is unlikely at this point. Every election cycle, however, there are thousands of other critically important races whether those are congressional, gubernatorial, mayoral or state legislative elections. Most receive remarkably little coverage, however, so even modest investment could yield substantial impact in terms of how much information voters are exposed to and what proportion of it is high-quality. Moreover, the sheer number of these races means abundant laboratories for innovation of new formats that could spread to other elections either further up or down ballot.

**What would REP-certified content look like?**

We don’t know yet. A central aim of this strategy is to better align market incentives so that American creative talent can be unleashed to reimagine candidate engagement for the internet age, so that it is both civically healthy and engaging. It has practically become an axiom in recent years that more engagement content is by definition less healthy. And there is an abundance of evidence that people generally act on deeper – often darker – impulses in their decisions regarding how to engage with content, but there are numerous examples of engaging content that defies that generalization. Consider the diversity of programs for example that have become popular based on creative formats that are neither based on inherently dramatic topics nor rely on humiliating participants (eg Shark Tank, The Great British Baking Show, Extreme Makeover, etc.) While it is critical that the formats do not denigrate the importance of elected office, it is our hope that, at least in the early stages, creative talent from other sectors would be incentivized to apply their talents to this challenge. There are some hints of what is possible from innovative news outlets like The Texas Tribune with their Split Decision program pictured above. Consultations with news publishers as well as entertainment producers and game designers have made us optimistic there would be significantly more innovation in how engaging this type of content would be if the right incentives were in place.

For a video illustrating potential formats click here: [Play](#) password: rep

**Would candidates participate?**

Whether a candidate participates is likely to come down to a simple question: “Would my participation help or hurt more my electoral chances?” In the near-term it would be important that there are REP-certified formats that enable one candidate to participate at a time. That way if Candidate A agrees to participate but Candidate B does not, then Candidate B could not unilaterally cancel the event as can happen with debates. There are already numerous formats along these lines whether it is a candidate townhall like Fox News hosted or the interactive Q&A the New York Times conducted for this year’s Democratic Presidential Primary. This would enable publishers to proceed and even offer Candidate B the opportunity to participate at a later date, insulating them from accusations of unfairly advantaging Candidate A. Voters’ attention is increasingly seen as the scarcity candidates are competing for, and REP Certification provides candidates with opportunities to garner that attention without having to pay for it. If even a relatively small number of candidates leverage that to their advantage, then others will take note and adapt. So it is our hope that even if some are reticent at first, we will see participation become an expected norm just like we have seen with other forms of social media over the last decade.
Operationalization

As with any content moderation strategy, there are critical and difficult operational questions to be addressed:

- How would compliance with the REP criteria be efficiently and effectively implemented?
- How could the REP Council cultivate and maintain cross-partisan credibility?
- How could it scale sustainably and effectively?

We do not claim to have all the answers, but below is our current thinking for how we might operationalize the strategy while drawing on some principles from lean innovation (efficient testing of core ideas upon which we learn and iterate). That orientation must however be balanced in this context with an acknowledgement that 1) even small interventions in the political realm can pose large risks, and 2) cultivating trust amongst the key stakeholders is essential for long-term viability.

Simulated Retroactive Certification – Given that social-distancing restrictions are likely to be in place in parts of the US, many publishers will be experimenting with novel candidate engagement formats in advance of the 2020 elections. From that pool of content, we could select a sub-set to test certification methodologies after the election with a provisional REP Council and corresponding implementing partners. That would present an opportunity to surface the difficult and nuanced questions associated with certification of real-world content and work out the inevitable kinks of operationalizing certification. Moreover, we could do so without the possibility of influencing electoral outcomes, which would both avoid unnecessary political risk and be more conducive to cultivating trust amongst the diverse stakeholders on the provisional REP Council.

Innovation Stimulus – The above could be done on its own, but ideally there would be added financial incentive for publishers to produce innovative content in 2020 that aligns with the REP criteria. That could take the form of a challenge similar to the XPRIZE or the Knight News Challenge, where financial awards are granted to producers of content that meets the REP criteria and perhaps demonstrate some other attributes (eg the content is particularly engaging, it reflects civility, etc). While there are obvious advantages to conducting such a competition in the context of actual elections, it could also be structured to solicit demos or mock-ups for REP-compliant concepts. This approach would have at least one significant benefit: it would broaden the pool of potential applicants beyond those who have the means and status to convene candidates. This could enable more risk and experimentation whether that is from a group of journalism school students in Missouri, a game designer in California or a small production company in Texas.

By conducting the above activities, we would develop a much better understanding for the feasibility and costs of certification as well as the breadth and quality of content that could emerge. This would enable us to make more informed projections regarding revenue generation from content and develop a corresponding sustainability model that takes into account both the costs of production by publishers and certification by the REP Council. It is too early to determine what the precise model would be, but in addition to typical ad revenue, fees paid by participating intermediaries, and philanthropic support we are hopeful there could be opportunities to broker premium sponsorship opportunities for REP-certified content so brands could demonstrate their commitment to improving our political system without the risk of being associated with partisan political content.

Conclusion

If successful, REP Certification could play an important role in helping:

- increase the signal to noise ratio of political content on participating intermediaries, cultivating a more informed and engaged electorate;
- ensure a more level-playing field so a broader pool of candidates can genuinely earn the attention they need to compete without riling up partisan passions through fearmongering or relying exclusively on big donors to buy voters’ attention; and
- support the production of high-quality local journalism.

There are still many open questions to be addressed. At the same time, REP Certification presents an aspirational vision for how the internet could cultivate healthier political discourse, and it is a strategy that has cross-partisan support and can be tested now with limited risk.